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ABSTRACT

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A Comparison of Preschool and Kindergarten Teacher Expectations for School Readiness*

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Running Head: TEACHER EXPECTATIONS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to obtain information on a variety of school skills that preschool and kindergarten teachers expect children to display in regular kindergarten classrooms. The Skill Expectation Survey for Kindergarten Readiness (SESKR) was administered to 21 preschool teachers and 28 kindergarten teachers from two school districts in Kansas. All teachers were interviewed in person regarding the following categories of skills: Academic, independent work, instruction-following, activity transitions, communication, social interaction, self-care, large group, and conduct. The results of the survey indicated that preschool teachers had higher expectations than kindergarten teachers for kindergarten entry skills. Preschool teachers' expectations approximated the kindergarten teachers' expectations of children's performance at kindergarten exit. The survey may be most useful in providing a framework for teachers to discuss school readiness expectations.

A Comparison of Preschool and Kindergarten Teacher Expectations for School Readiness

The transition of young children between school programs can be stressful for some children, families, and service providers (Turnbull & Winton, 1983; Ziegler, 1985). Transitions involve change for both children and parents. Such changes may include making new friends, meeting new teachers, learning new routines, and adjusting to new schedules. Understanding the complexity of the separation experience for children and adults is important for transition planning. While teachers and parents often carefully plan the children's entry into early childhood programs, preparation for separation from early childhood programs is equally important. A positive experience with initial transitions, particularly the transition from preschool to kindergarten, may serve as a prototype for future school adjustments and may help young children adopt coping skills to manage separation throughout life (Fowler, 1982; Ziegler, 1985).

One way to facilitate transitions from preschool to kindergarten is to determine the entry and exit criteria for successful experiences in kindergarten. The entry criteria defined by preschool and kindergarten teachers may provide information on prerequisite skills which may need to be taught prior to the transition to kindergarten. The kindergarten teachers' exit criteria could provide useful information to preschool teachers who wish to enhance skills for children who are slow learners or who

have developmental delays.

Traditionally, child characteristics such as chronological age, sex, and developmental age have been used, with varying success, to predict young children's readiness for school (May & Welch, 1986; Wood, Powell, & Knight, 1984; Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986). Also, readiness and screening tests, such as the Gesell School Readiness Test (Ilg & Ames, 1972) and the Metropolitan Readiness Tests (Nurss & McGauvran, 1976), have provided educators with information about children's potential learning abilities (Judy, 1986; Meisels, 1987). Currently, researchers are questioning the usefulness of these tests. For example, a recent study found that the differences identified on the Gesell Screening Test between "ready" and "unready" kindergarten groups tend to disappear by the end of third grade (May & Welch, 1986). In addition, the reliability and validity of these readiness tests may not be adequate for sorting children into ready and unready groups (Meisels, 1987; Shepard & Smith, 1986); thus, it may not be possible to make highly accurate assessments of school readiness based on such tests (Thurlow, O'Sullivan, & Ysseldyke, 1986).

In addition, teachers' actual expectations for readiness skills may not match the standards assessed by school readiness tests. For example, the initial problem of assessing a child's school readiness becomes complicated if the teacher's standards for kindergarten success are increasing (Doremus, 1986; Roberts, 1986). A child may display all the preacademic prerequisites on a screening test, but

may not meet the preacademic, social or conduct standards of a specific teacher's classroom. Little empirical evidence exists on teachers' expectations for kindergarten readiness; however, many educators are concerned about the perceived (but not documented) shift in teacher expectations and curriculum standards for young children (Elkind, 1986; Jalongo, 1986; Seefeldt, 1985; Zigler, 1986). For example, some educators have observed that preschool children already have been exposed to the traditional kindergarten curriculum (Elkind, 1986), and that the kindergarten curriculum now resembles what used to be taught in the first grade (May & Welch, 1986; Seefeldt, 1985). While the traditional kindergarten may be vanishing, the major concern is that programs are driving young children too hard and depriving them of of play in their childhood (Bain, 1981; Zigler, 1986). The actual assessment of teachers' expectations could document these purported increases in expectations.

Another problem occurs when the child meets the standards on the screening instrument which do reflect the teacher's expectations, but the child lacks the self-care, social, attending, or instruction-following skills that the teacher also expects for successful kindergarten experiences (Bradley, 1984; Vincent, Salisbury, Walter, Brown, Gruenewald, & Powers, 1980). For instance, the literature on mainstreaming suggests that young children with handicaps often experience significant difficulty in adjusting to the behavioral demands of regular teachers in less-

restrictive settings (Fowler, 1982; Walter & Vincent, 1982). Teachers and parents may need to instruct those skills identified as necessary in the regular kindergarten environment. An alternative approach to defining the criteria for school readiness is to examine the skills that teachers consider important for school entry.

An important transition question regarding teacher expectations is: Does the preschool teacher's perspective on readiness skills match the kindergarten teacher's perspective? The assessment of those expectations could provide guidelines for planning transitions from preschool to kindergarten. By examining the similarities and differences between preschool and kindergarten curricular emphases, skills that appear to be essential for school performance could be identified. The purpose of this study was to assess preschool and kindergarten teachers' expectations for kindergarten readiness.

Method

Subjects

Twenty-one preschool teachers and 28 kindergarten teachers participated in this study. The preschool teachers were selected randomly from a variety of preschools and daycare centers located in two counties in Kansas; one county contained a university community, the other was primarily rural. No home daycare providers participated. All kindergarten teachers from the two school districts participated. The average preschool teacher had taught seven years, five of which were in early childhood (preschool and/or kindergarten). The average kindergarten teacher had taught nine

years, with six of those years in early childhood. The number of years in teaching ranged from 1 to 20 for the preschool teachers and ranged from 1 to 25 for the kindergarten teachers. The preschool classrooms contained an average of 16 children; typically one of those children was mildly handicapped. The average number of children enrolled in kindergarten classrooms was 23; typically three of those children had mild handicaps. Approximately 54% of all students who attended kindergarten classrooms had attended preschool or day care centers.

Procedure

All teachers were contacted by telephone to solicit their participation. They were informed that the purpose of the study was to identify teachers' expectations regarding kindergarten readiness skills and that they would be asked to complete the Skill Expectations Survey for Kindergarten Readiness (SESKR). Appointments to complete the survey were scheduled at each teacher's convenience. The surveys were presented to each teacher by one of four graduate students using an interview protocol. The interviews most often occurred in the teachers' classrooms after school and took approximately one hour to complete.

After completing the survey, each of the preschool and kindergarten teachers in one district were given a $10.00 gift certificate from a local department store. Teachers in the other district were given an activities book, Preparing Your Child for Kindergarten (National Education Association, 1983) as compensation

for their time. In addition, these teachers were invited to attend an inservice workshop on the topic of planning for school transitions.

Each teacher was given a copy of the survey form to follow while the interviewer read the questions and recorded answers. The survey consisted of two sections. The first section of the survey requested demographic information about the teacher and the classroom, such as amount of teaching experience and number of students who had attended their classes. The remainder of the survey contained nine skill categories: Academics, independent work, instruction-following, activity transitions, communication (with subcategories of receptive and expressive language), social interaction, self-care, large group participation and conduct. The survey assessed a total of 151 specific skills across the nine categories. The number of skills per category ranged from 6 to 41 with an average of 17 items per category.

The interviewer asked the teacher to rate the importance of students' abilities to accomplish each skill within each category. The teachers were asked to use the following three point rating scale: (1) not important; (2) somewhat important; and (3) very important. The preschool teachers rated the importance of attaining each skill by the time a child "graduated" from preschool. The kindergarten teachers used the same rating scale for the same skills at entrance to kindergarten, by the middle of kindergarten, and by exit from kindergarten. Finally, at the end of the survey the

teachers were asked to rank the nine categories of skills in order of most important category to least important category.

Survey items were selected from two sources: (1) developmental assessments (e.g., Brigance, 1978; Cohen & Gross, 1979; LeMay, Griffin & Sanford, 1981; Stevens, 1984), and (2) the literature on early childhood education and special education (e.g., Cobb & Hops, 1973; Fowler, 1982; LeBlanc, 1982; LeBlanc, Etzel, & Domash, 1978; Lichtenstein & Ireton, 1984; Paget & Bracken, 1983; Walter & Vincent, 1982; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1979). Additionally, prior to using the survey, items were reviewed by early childhood education specialists at the University of Kansas Child Development Laboratories. Eleven items that were judged to be developmentally inappropriate (e.g., names months of the year, can multiply/divide) were distributed across eight of the skill categories. These items were included to ensure that teachers attended to each item and to identify teachers with overly high expectations. These eleven items were excluded from the data analysis since both preschool and kindergarten teachers rarely ranked them as important.

Results

The data from the teachers' ratings were analyzed by summing the scores of each item for all teachers in each group, and then calculating the mean score for each item. This analysis was conducted for the preschool teachers' expectations for the end of preschool and for the kindergarten teachers' expectations for the

beginning, middle, and end of the kindergarten year. The results of the preschool and kindergarten teacher interviews are summarized in Table 1. This table presents the skills, within each category, which were rated as a 3 (very important) by 80% of the teachers.

Insert Table 1 about here

Overall, preschool teachers rated 78 items (52% of the total number of items) as being very important for preschool exit. The preschool teachers rated some items from each of the nine categories as very important.

In comparison, kindergarten teachers rated only six items (4% of the total number of items) as very important at kindergarten entry. Those items were from the academic, self-care, and communication categories: (a) Identifying colors: Red, blue, yellow, green, (b) identifying body parts: Eyes and nose, (c) identifying body parts: Hands, head and legs, (d) toileting, (e) responding to name, and (f) responding to warning words. All six items were also rated by preschool teachers as very important.

By the middle of kindergarten, kindergarten teachers rated 58 items (38% of the total number of items) as very important. The items were distributed across the nine categories. Kindergarten teachers closely agreed with preschool teachers regarding the importance of items by the middle of the year. Only three of the 58 items identified by kindergarten teachers were not listed as very

important by preschool teachers. Those items were labeling the colors orange, purple, and brown, following verbal teacher directions, and participating at the appropriate time in large group.

By the end of kindergarten, 80% of the teachers considered 122 (81%) items as very important. The five of the six items initially rated as important at kindergarten entry remained important for the middle and end of kindergarten. A comparison of preschool teachers' expectations for preschool exit with kindergarten teachers' expectations for kindergarten exit showed that 75 of the 78 items identified by preschool teachers as very important were included in the 122 items identified by kindergarten teachers. The three items identified by the preschool teachers as important which were not included by kindergarten teachers were: Imitating peers in play, initiating peer interactions, and exhibiting a breadth of vocabulary similar to peers.

At the end of the questionnaire, teachers were asked to make a forced-choice ranking for the nine categories from most important to least important. The teachers ranked the overall level of importance of the categories for their classrooms; the ranking was not limited to a particular time of the year (beginning, middle, or end). The data were summed and averaged, and the results are shown

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Insert Table 2 about here

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in Table 2. Overall, the standard deviations for responses in each category were high. Because the standard deviations were fairly large and the average rankings were very close, claims about their relative importance should be viewed cautiously. In general, preschool and kindergarten teachers rated the top five items from the same categories, but in a different order. The top five items for preschool teachers were social interaction, communication instruction-following, conduct, and self-care. For the kindergarten teachers, the top five categories were conduct, instruction-following, self-care, social interaction, and communication. Interestingly, while the top five responses of the preschool and kindergarten teachers varied in levels of importance, the two groups of teachers were in perfect agreement on the four categories that were least important (academic, independent work, large group, and transitions).

Discussion

In general, the results of the teacher interview data show at least 80% of the preschool teachers listed many more skills as very important for kindergarten entry than did 80% of the kindergarten teachers. The fact that 80% of the kindergarten teachers rated only six skills as very important for kindergarten entry may suggest that kindergarten teachers' standards in these two Kansas communities are not becoming more stringent. This sample of kindergarten teachers may have listed fewer skills because half of the children in their classrooms had no previous preschool or group

day care experiences. The potential difference in kindergarten teachers' expectations for children with and without previous preschool experience also needs further exploration.

The preschool teachers' data most closely resembled the kindergarten teachers' responses for kindergarten exit. Test bias may have influenced these results. The preschool teachers' survey required responses only for preschool exit. In contrast, the kindergarten teachers were asked to rate the importance of skill performance at entry to kindergarten, mid-year placement in kindergarten and exit from kindergarten. The kindergarten teachers' responses clearly indicate that they expect to or are willing to teach nearly all basic skills during the kindergarten year. They expect, therefore, that children will be able to perform a large number (122) of skills by exit from kindergarten.

The preschool teachers' high expectations may be in response to misperceptions of an increasing academic emphasis in kindergarten classrooms or the pressure from parents to provide academic programs (cf. Doremus, 1986). On the other hand, the increasing number of years children spend in early childhood programs may prompt preschool teachers to recognize that some curriculum changes are appropriate in order to meet the interests and abilities of children who are developmentally ready for more advanced experiences.

The preschool teachers expectations were developmentally appropriate. The items on the survey were selected from developmental assessments and the current literature on early

childhood education. While the preschool teachers considered more of these items important than the kindergarten teachers at kindergarten entry, they did not rank the developmentally inappropriate items as important (e.g., responds to east, west, north, south directions).

The forced-choice ranking of the nine curricular categories suggests that preschool teachers in this sample emphasize social interaction and communication, whereas kindergarten teachers in this sample emphasized conduct and instruction-following as the most important categories. The higher ranking of conduct and instruction-following by this sample of kindergarten teachers supports previous research which showed that elementary school teachers consistently rated appropriate classroom behavior as a higher priority than social competence (Walker & Rankin, 1983). A replication of the Walker and Rankin (1983) study with secondary educators also found classroom conduct to be very important (Kerr & Zigmond, 1986).

This study suggests that the curricular emphasis in classroom deportment may begin as early as kindergarten. Recently, Jalongo (1986) noted that curriculum decisions by the kindergarten teacher may result from the pressures the teacher receives from administrators to follow the district-wide adopted curriculum, to complete workbooks and to demonstrate competencies on national tests. To meet these curricular demands, teachers may need to focus on issues like conduct and instruction-following to ensure that

children can perform various skills. When such demands are not present, teachers may view social interaction as most important because their teaching is not bound to a specific curriculum, and "learning how to learn" through planned experiences, cooperating, sharing, and getting along with others may take priority in the curriculum (Elkind, 1986; Roberts, 1986).

In addition to serving as a research tool, this survey may be useful in applied settings. First, it may provide a framework for developing local guidelines for school readiness skills. Second, it may facilitate transitions from preschool to kindergarten. For example, teachers and parents may find the survey useful for placement decisions. In some situations, placement decisions could be coordinated to match children's abilities with teacher expectations. In other situations, the survey may be useful for identifying the most critical prerequisite skills for kindergarten so that those skills can be taught directly before the transition. Perhaps most importantly, the survey may give teachers a forum for discussing their expectations and for planning continuity across preschool and kindergarten experiences. Anecdotally, many of the teachers interviewed in this study were eager to obtain a copy of the survey for their own personal use.

The results of this survey also may have implications for the preparation of children who are slow learners, or are developmentally delayed. Children who are ready learners may

acquire this large number of skills without much difficulty in the nine months of kindergarten. Children who require repeated tries at new tasks, and practice with new skills may have more difficulty meeting the kindergarten exit criteria. Given the concordance between preschool and kindergarten teachers on skills importance, perhaps it is appropriate for preschool teachers to provide exposure on these kindergarten exit skills during the year before kindergarten.

A limitation that restricts the generality of this study is sample size. The relatively small sample of subjects (N = 21, N = 28) limits the usefulness of the results. Further research is needed to conduct this survey with more preschool and kindergarten teachers. Interestingly, World Book recently published a pamphlet that discusses the results of a survey of 3,000 kindergarten teachers that assessed kindergarten readiness skills (World Book, 1987). Many of the same skills were rated as important exit skills by kindergarten teachers in the present study. Both national and local surveys of kindergarten expectations can provide guidelines for teachers and parents.

Additional research is needed to determine not only what teachers expect, but what they will tolerate, and how these essential skills are acquired in school. For example, Walker and Rankin (1983) found that teacher-reported ratings of social behavior standards and expectations were somewhat related to directly observed teacher behavior; however, the instrument's ability to

predict actual teaching or management behavior was limited. Further research is also needed to determine if all students in a classroom tend to exhibit the behaviors the teacher identified as very important. If not, do the students who do not exhibit these behaviors stand out as problems? Do the students acquire the target skills quickly, within the regular classroom routine or is special training required? In sum, teachers and researchers need to work together to determine how readiness skills can best be identified and acquired in school.

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Table 1

TOP RATED ITEMS PER CATEGORY

Category	Preschool Exit	Kindergarten Enter	Mid	Exit
Academic (45 items)				
Label eyes, nose	X	X	X	X
Label hands, head, legs	X	X	X	X
Label neck, toes	X		X	X
Label red, blue yellow, green	X	X		X
Label numbers 1-5	X		X	X
Label circle, square, rectangle	X		X	X
Understand concept of size	X		X	X
Understand concept of same/different	X		X	X
Sort objects by attribute	X		X	X
Recognize first name	X		X	X
Write first name	X		X	X
Label numbers 1-10	X			X
Hold pencil correctly	X			X
Concept of ordering (e.g., first/last)	X			X
Concept of spatial relations	X			X
Understand concept of weather	X			X
Label orange, purple, brown			X	X
Label black, pink, gray, white				X
Label heel, elbow				X
Label triangle, diamond, oval				X
Label numbers 1-20				X
Rote count 1-20				X
Associate numbers with their quantities				X
Use paste/glue				X
Label upper case letters				X
Label lower case letters				X
Cut simple shapes				X
Understand sequence of events				X
Understand concept of time				X
Label days of the week in order				X
Write letters				X
Move top to bottom, left to right on worksheets				X
Independent Work Skills (11 items)				
Seeks assistance when needed	X		X	X
Asks for information when necessary	X		X	X
Attends without distracting self or peers	X			X
Seeks teacher attention appropriately	X			X

Table 1 (continued)

Category	Preschool Exit	Kindergarten Enter	Kindergarten Mid	Kindergarten Exit
Follows routine at end of work session	X			X
Begins work following instruction to the group	X			X
Completes task on time				X
Uses classroom equipment independently				X
Following Verbal Teacher Directions (6 items)				
Complies with one-step instructions	X		X	X
Complies with directions to the group	X		X	X
Complies with two-step instructions	X			X
Follows verbal teacher direction (e.g., draw a line under)			X	X
Complies with three-step instructions				X
Transitions (7 items)				
Locates personal possessions and returns them to appropriate location	X		X	X
Goes to various areas of room when requested and/or directed	X		X	X
Locates materials and replaces them or puts them in order when finished	X		X	X
Stays "on-task" during transitions	X			X
Lines-up and stays in line during transition	X			X
Makes transitions using contextual cues				X
Communication Skills				
Receptive Language (13 items)				
Comes to adults when called by name	X	X	X	X
Responds to warning words	X	X		X
Identifies soft and loud sounds	X		X	X
Responds to position words	X			X
Responds to common nouns and verbs	X			X
Discriminates between sounds in words				X
Recognizes rhyming words				X
Recognizes incorrect pronounciation				X
Matches beginning and ending sounds in words				X
Matches sounds with written letters				X
Identifies opposite concepts				X
Understands past, present, future tenses				X
Discriminates between singular and plural nouns				X

Table 1 (continued)

Category	Preschool Exit	Kindergarten Enter	Kindergarten Mid	Kindergarten Exit
Expressive Language (13 items)				
Communicates needs and preferences	X		X	X
Shares experiences and ideas with others	X		X	X
Uses yes/no and wh- questions	X			X
Speaks loudly enough but not too loudly	X			X
Has same breadth of vocabulary as peers	X			
Takes turns in conversation				X
Uses pronouns correctly				X
Speaks intelligibly				X
Social Interaction (12 items)				
Initiates contact with peers	X		X	X
Shares, exchanges materials with peers	X		X	X
Uses toys appropriately with peers	X		X	X
Uses verbal requests during play	X		X	X
Uses peers' and teachers' names	X		X	X
Stays with activity appropriate amount of time	X		X	X
Waits turn to speak	X		X	X
Role-plays with peers	X			X
Expresses affection, emotions, and feelings appropriately	X			X
Uses courtesy words spontaneously	X			X
Initiates play activities during play time	X			
Responds to peer initiations	X			
Maintains interaction with a peer				X
Imitates appropriate peer actions				X
Plays simple table games				X
Demonstrates good sportsmanship				X
Self-Care (19 items)				
Takes care of own toileting needs without supervision	X	X	X	X
Washes hands without supervision	X		X	X
Dresses with minimal assistance	X		X	X
Eats skillfully with minimal assistance	X		X	X
Cleans own work space	X		X	X
Blows and wipes nose independently	X		X	X
Is responsible for personal belongings	X		X	X
Gives full name when asked	X			X

Table 1 (continued)

Category	Preschool Exit	Kindergarten Enter	Kindergarten Mid	Kindergarten Exit
Puts shoes on correct feet	X			X
Zips jacket or coat				X
Buttons garment correctly				X
Ties or fastens shoes				X
Buckles belt				X
Tell street address				X
Gives home telephone number				X
Large Group Time (11 items)				
Sits appropriately	X		X	X
Participation in group is appropriate to the task or topic	X		X	X
Focuses attention on speaker and shifts attention appropriately	X		X	X
Participates according to rules	X		X	X
Does not disrupt peers	X		X	X
Answers teacher's question when individually addressed	X			X
Individually addresses group	X			X
Participates at appropriate time			X	X
Answers teacher's questions when addressed as a group				X
Asks appropriate questions				X
Knows a few songs or rhymes completely				X
Classroom Conduct (12 items)				
Works/plays without disturbing peers	X		X	X
If misbehaving, complies with second instruction	X		X	X
Waits appropriately	X		X	X
Responds to praise/social reinforcers	X		X	X
Handles corrections appropriately	X		X	X
Refrains from aggressive behavior	X		X	X
Complies with initial instruction	X			X
Reacts appropriately to changes in routine	X			X
Follows most classroom rules and routines	X			X
Uses time between activities appropriately	X			X
Ignores inappropriate peer behavior				X

Table 2

Preschool and Kindergarten Teacher Ranking of Skill Categories

PRESCHOOL			KINDERGARTEN		
Category	M	SD	Category	M	SD
Social Interaction	2.43	1.65	Instruction-following	3.29	1.69
Communication	3.19	2.06	Conduct	3.29	1.62
Instruction-following	3.38	1.25	Self-care	3.93	3.21
Conduct	4.76	2.14	Social Interaction	4.39	1.65
Self-care	4.90	2.84	Communication	4.57	2.11
Academic	5.38	2.13	Academic	5.32	2.87
Independent Work	5.90	1.63	Independent Work	5.64	2.21
Large Group	6.76	1.80	Large Group	6.61	1.84
Activity Transitions	8.29	.98	Activity Transitions	7.96	1.05